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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANTANANARIVO 000935

SIPDIS

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PASS TO PEACE CORPS FOR DIRECTOR TSCHETTER
DEPARTMENT FOR AF/FO - JSWAN
DEPARTMENT FOR AF/E - MBEYZEROV AND JKNIGHT
ADDIS FOR AMBASSADOR COURVILLE
CAPETOWN FOR LA LIME
PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHER

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SUBJECT: COMOROS: PRESIDENT APPEALS TO U.S. WHILE HOPING
AU INTERVENTION WILL PREVAIL

REF: ANTANANARIVO 933

Classified By: Ambassador Niels Marquardt for reasons 1.4 b and d

¶1. (C) Summary: With virtually his whole country's progress and prospects held hostage over the continuing impasse in Anjouan (reftel), Union of the Comoros President Ahmed Abdallah Sambi nonetheless projected an air of friendly calm in his first meeting with Ambassador Marquardt on September 13. He lauded past cooperation with the U.S., particularly citing the favorable experience with the Peace Corps over ten years ago and asking that Peace Corps reopen. He also said the Union hopes to qualify for both AGOA and MCC, noted that they meet most of the requirements for both, and asked for more help from USAID. Regarding Anjouan, he admitted to pressures to solve the impasse through unilateral military action, and said that Morocco and other countries are providing the necessary arms and boats. That said, he was almost passionate in stressing his desire to "improve my country's international image" - an effort he said would go down the drain if he has to resort to force. Instead, he is calling on the international community, led by the African Union and South Africa, to clear the path toward free and fair "island elections" on Anjouan. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Ambassador Marquardt had an unplanned and unexpected hour-long tete-a-tete with President Sambi on September 13, while waiting at Moroni airport to depart via helicopter to the USS Forrest Sherman. The ship visit was the first in the Comoros' 32-year existence as an independent nation, and Sambi said he took it as a sign of good things to come that we had sent the ship. Indeed, the Ambassador replied that the U.S. seeks to include the Comoros prominently in our increasing military cooperation efforts in the Indian Ocean. This cooperation will expand to include soon the provision of a patrol boat (the Arch Angel) already identified in the U.S., as well as the invitation for the Comoros to participate in the Automated Information System (AIS) program, which was demonstrated on board to his obvious delight. President Sambi was grateful for the offers of military cooperation and said he would sign up immediately for AIS and looks forward to the delivery of the Arch Angel.

¶3. (C) Turning quickly to his major preoccupation - the impasse with renegade Anjouan island warlord Mohamed Bacar

which has thwarted the holding of free and fair elections there since last June - Sambi appealed to the U.S. for support. Sambi repeatedly referred to the situation as a "rebellion" - the same term used by the national parliament earlier in September in a resolution calling on Sambi to use "all necessary means" to break the impasse. He described the process by which he believes that the AU is moving towards sanctions on Anjouan at the meeting scheduled September 18 in Capetown (reftel). He described the misery of the Comoran people and the extent to which progress, which he promised in his election campaign, remains utterly blocked by the Anjouan impasse. He said he fears that debt forgiveness, which his country has earned, will be delayed or even lost due to the IMF's inability to deal with the Union under present circumstances. Sambi said that Bacar has refused to hold the election because he knows he has become unpopular, even despised, by the people of Anjouan. Bacar's "game," Sambi said, is to play for time, during which he continues to enrich himself through collection of customs duties, port fees, and profits from illicit operations like the shell banks prominent in Anjouan. Meanwhile Sambi complained that the supply to the other two islands of key foodstuffs, such as rice and sugar, is compromised, intentionally, by Bacar's actions. He said that Bacar will not go down fighting, as he has deposited his ill-gotten gains in France, where he also has real estate, and would take refuge there if need be.

14. (C) Asked how much patience he has, Sambi described first his efforts to improve the Comoros' international image. We suffer from a terrible reputation because of our history of coups and instability, he said; I have tried since being elected to project a different image, one of peace and reason. These efforts will be undermined if I

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have to take military action against Anjouan, which would necessarily result in confrontation and bloodshed. "Personally, therefore, I do not favor this option." However, he said he "must be prepared" for every option, and readily admitted that Morocco and other countries have provided arms and zodiacs capable of landing a 200-man force on Anjouan. (Note: A Moroccan military C-130 was offloading cargo immediately outside the VIP Pavilion in which this conversation took place.) He said that he has a military plan that he believes will work, and that support for Bacar is so weak that it would crumble at the first signs of confrontation. He lamented the decision "by the international community" to return confiscated arms in 2001 to the island president, rather than to the Union; this had created the present impasse, he said, as otherwise Bacar and his militia would not have arms.

15. (C) Turning again to bilateral issues, Sambi was full of praise for the previous Peace Corps presence in the Comoros, and he said he both needs and wants them back. The Ambassador said this option was under consideration, following Sambi's request to Peace Corps Director Tschetter earlier this year, and that a Peace Corps survey mission to the Comoros had already taken place. Sambi also said that his country, while small, was democratic and reform-minded and deserved to be included in U.S. initiatives like AGOA and MCC. He also praised USAID's modest presence in the Comoros and asked that it be stepped up. Sambi said he hoped the Ambassador would be supportive of these efforts. The Ambassador responded that he also saw needs and opportunities in the Comoros and promised to work hard in support of strengthened bilateral relations and a more visible U.S. presence. President Sambi then alluded to "perceptions within the Muslim world of U.S. animosity toward Islam and its adherents"; he said that while he did not share this view at all, he offers his country as a place for the U.S. to reach out and to demonstrate our true friendship to Muslims.

16. (C) The impromptu conversation was followed, after

return from the USS Forrest Sherman, by a credentials ceremony in the Presidential Palace. Sambi's formal remarks were consistent with his private ones, saying of Anjouan "... the situation of rebellion which is persisting on this island is not only delaying the social and economic development of the country, but it also stands as a real threat to the unity and stability of the country." He also explicitly reaffirmed his continuing cooperation in combatting terrorism, saying: "...I would like to renew to you the commitment of my Government to continue to provide its humble contribution to the U.S. Administration in view of eradicating the plague of terrorism, in all its forms." The Ambassador, in his prepared statement, expressed support for the AU effort in Anjouan, as well as the desire to increase bilateral contacts and programs in the Comoros.

17. (C) Ambassador's Comment: President Sambi's initial impression on me was highly positive, and consistent with previous analysis describing him as moderate, patient, and democratic. While remaining outwardly calm, he nonetheless made clear that he is under significant and mounting pressure to take action to resolve the Anjouan impasse, by force if necessary. I told him that while we understand that his very Presidency is at stake over this single issue, we continue to counsel patience and restraint in order for ongoing diplomacy take its course. The onset of Ramadan presumably means that no military action will be initiated for another month, at the earliest. Thereafter, however, if the AU has not shown adequate results, I would not expect him to wait much longer before putting his new equipment to the test. We should, therefore, consider all means at our disposal to enhance the AU's prospects for success, including raising this issue in our conversations with AU and South African leadership and (assuming today's meeting results in a AU statement) issuing the public statement of support for the AU recommended in reftel. End Comment.

MARQUARDT